

# 18th-Century France: The Rococo and Watteau

In 1715 the French greeted a new king for the first time in seventy-two years. Louis XV, a boy only five years old, succeeded his great-grandfather Louis XIV, the Sun King, who had made France the preeminent power in Europe. For the next eight years the late king's nephew, the duc d'Orléans, governed as regent. His appetite for beauty and vivaciousness was well known, and he set aside the piety enforced by Louis XIV at Versailles. France turned away from imperial aspirations to focus on more personal—and pleasurable—pursuits. As political life and private morals relaxed, the change was mirrored by a new style in art, one that was intimate, decorative, and often erotic.

## The Rococo Style

Louis XIV's desire to glorify his dignity and the magnificence of France had been well served by the monumental and formal qualities of most seventeenth-century French art. But members of the succeeding court began to decorate their elegant homes in a lighter, more delicate manner. This new style has been known since the last century as "rococo," from the French word, *rocaille*, for rock and shell garden ornamentation. First emerging in the decorative arts, the rococo emphasized pastel colors, sinuous curves, and patterns based on flowers, vines, and shells. Painters turned from grandiloquence to the sensual surface delights of color and light, and from weighty religious and historical subjects—though these were never ignored completely—to more intimate mythological scenes, views of daily life, and portraiture. Similarly, sculptors increasingly applied their skills to small works for the appreciation of private patrons.

## Antoine Watteau and the Fête Galante

Though several painters of the preceding generation had experimented with the ingredients of rococo—emphasizing color, a lighthearted approach, and close observation—Antoine Watteau merged them into something new.

Born near the Flemish border, Watteau was influenced by the carefully described scenes of everyday life popular in Holland and Flanders. Arriving in Paris in 1702, he first made his living by copying these genre paintings, which contained moralizing messages not always fully understood by French collectors. He worked for a painter of theatrical scenes and encountered the Italian *commedia dell'arte* and its French imitators. The stock characters of these broadly drawn, improvised comedies appear often in Watteau's paintings, and the world of the theater inspired him to mingle the real and imagined in enigmatic scenes. Through work with a fashionable rococo decorator, Watteau came eventually to the attention of patrons and established artists. He began studies at the official Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture—membership in which was necessary for important commissions—and gained access to new art collections being amassed by aristocrats and members of the expanding bourgeoisie. Influenced by his study of Rubens and Venetian Renaissance artists, Watteau developed a free, delicate painting technique and a taste for warm, shimmering colors.

In 1717 Watteau's "masterpiece" submitted for admission to the Academy was accepted as a "fête galante." With this new category, the Academy recognized the novelty of his work. The immediate popularity of these garden scenes, in which aristocratic young couples meet in amorous pursuits, suggests how well the *fête galante* matched the pleasure-seeking spirit of the early eighteenth century.

Engravings made Watteau's subjects and manner widely known. Though the lyrical mystery of his own work remained unique, other painters who specialized in the *fête galante*, notably Pater and Lancret, also enjoyed international popularity.



**Antoine Watteau**  
French, 1684–1721

## Ceres (Summer)

1715/1716. Oil on canvas. Samuel H. Kress Collection 1961.9.50

Ceres, Roman goddess of the harvest, is surrounded by signs of the summer zodiac: Gemini, Cancer, and Leo. This is one of four paintings of the seasons in mythological garb that Watteau painted for the home of Pierre Crozat. None of the others survive.

Watteau lived briefly in the Crozat household, studying the wealthy banker's impressive art collection, particularly works by Veronese. The shimmering brightness and lively pastel colors in *Ceres* reflect the influence of the Venetian painter and soften her large figure and formal pose.

Watteau was probably introduced to Crozat by Charles de La Fosse, a well-known painter and established member of the Academy, and it is likely that Watteau painted *Ceres* after sketches made by the older artist. Their collaboration stands at the transition between the monumental forms of the preceding century and the rococo.



## Italian Comedians

probably 1720. Oil on canvas. Samuel H. Kress Collection 1946.7.9

A troupe of the popular Italian comedy (*commedia dell'arte*) is gathered on stage, perhaps at curtain call. Standing awkwardly in the center is the vulnerable figure of Pierrot, the simple-minded valet and unlucky lover who was the most human of the *commedia*'s stock characters. Scaramouche, the braggart, introduces him while the other characters interact around the strangely still Pierrot.

A brilliant draftsman, Watteau frequently sketched friends posed in

theatrical costumes. Possibly their faces, not those of actors, are painted here. It has been suggested that the figures illustrate the passage from youth on the left to old age on the right, or that the melancholic Watteau saw himself in the sad Pierrot. Watteau's intention was to evoke a mood, not simply describe a scene, and his greatest paintings, like this one, remain puzzling and oddly poignant.

*Italian Comedians* was among Watteau's last works. Ill most of his life, he traveled to England in 1719 for treatment by the fashionable physician Robert Mead. This painting was probably the doctor's payment. Unfortunately, Watteau died of tuberculosis soon after, not yet thirty-seven years old.



**Jean-Baptiste-Joseph Pater**  
French, 1695–1736

## Fête Champêtre

about 1730. Oil on canvas. Samuel H. Kress Collection 1946.7.19

In this lush park elegant young aristocrats flirt, dance, and engage in intimate conversation, each couple an "episode" in the progress of courtship. Their anecdotal character makes Pater's paintings less ambiguous than Watteau's enigmatic works, which a contemporary criticized as having "no subject."

Pater studied under Watteau—who admitted to being an impatient master—and took over his commissions after he died. Haunted by fear of poverty, Pater worked incessantly but also rather mechanically, reusing figure groups and motifs from one painting to the next. He was received by the Academy as a painter of "modern subjects," and more than six hundred of his *fêtes galantes* survive today.

Several of the poses in this painting and Pater's unfinished *On the Terrace* nearby can be traced to seventeenth-century Flemish artist Peter Paul Rubens, whose works could be seen in Paris during the 1700s. The dark dress of the woman on the right, fashionable in the preceding century, and the garden sculpture of Venus, which underscores the painting's focus on love, also reflect his influence. But Pater, in keeping with rococo tastes, has refined Rubens' robust figures. They are composed in graceful groups, their fine silks painted with cool, powdery colors, applied in feathery brushstrokes.

- 1713War of Spanish Succession ends, halting France’s expansion in Europe
- 1715Louis XV succeeds Louis XIV as king of France
- 1717Handel’s *Water Music* first performed on Thames
- 1718New Orleans founded by the French
- 1721Death of Watteau
- 1727Death of Isaac Newton
- 1740Frederick the Great assumes Prussian throne
- Richardson’s *Pamela, Virtue Rewarded* published
- 1742Handel’s *Messiah* first performed
- 1745Madame de Pompadour becomes mistress of Louis XV
- 1748Excavation of Roman Pompeii begun
- 1751First volume of Diderot’s *Encyclopedia* appeared
- 1758Voltaire completes *Candide*
- 1762Rousseau’s *Social Contract* published
- Mozart, age six, begins tour
- Catherine the Great begins rule in Russia
- 1763Seven Years War ends; France loses most colonial possessions
- 1770Death of Boucher
- 1774Louis XVI becomes king of France
- Goethe’s *Sorrows of Young Werther* published
- 1776Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* published
- American War of Independence begins
- 1777Lavoisier proves air contains oxygen and nitrogen
- 1779Death of Chardin
- 1781Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* published
- 1783Treaty of Versailles ends American War of Independence
- 1789French Revolution begins with storming of the Bastille
- 1806Death of Fragonard



**François Boucher**  
French, 1702–1770

***Madame Bergeret***

1746. Oil on canvas. Samuel H. Kress Collection 1946.7.3

As a young artist, Boucher engraved the works of Watteau for publication. Engravings like his, often with verses added, spread the rococo style across Europe. Boucher himself became the most fashionable artist in France under the patronage of Madame de Pompadour, Louis XV’s powerful mistress, whose refined tastes influenced French art for two decades. It may have been either the husband or the brother of the woman in this

painting who introduced the young artist to his future patron.

Of the more than one thousand paintings Boucher produced, only about twenty are portraits. Contemporaries noted that the artist had difficulty capturing a likeness, a handicap thought in the 1700s to be less severe for women’s portraits than men’s, since flattery could substitute for veracity. The pale colors, rich fabrics, and rustic touch of the straw hat are typical of Boucher’s style. It captured the grace of a pampered way of life, in which, as a contemporary noted, “we really have nothing else to do but to seek pleasant sensations and feelings.”



**Nicolas Lancret**  
French, 1690–1743

***La Camargo Dancing***

about 1730. Oil on canvas. Andrew W. Mellon Collection 1937.1.89

Of the artists who followed Watteau’s lead, Lancret was the most talented and inventive. More a rival than an imitator, he was admitted to the Academy as a painter of *fêtes galantes* but also produced historical and religious paintings—and portraits, especially of actors and dancers.

In this inspired hybrid Lancret set such a portrait within the elegant garden of a *fête galante*. As if spotlighted, the famous dancer *La Camargo* shares a pas de deux with her partner Laval. They are framed by lush foliage, which seems to echo their movements. Marie-Cuppi de Camargo (1710–1770) was widely praised for her sensitive ear for music, her airiness, and her strength. Voltaire likened her leaps to those of nymphs. Fashions and hairstyles were named after her, and her real contributions to dance were substantial. She was the first to shorten her skirts so that complicated steps could be fully appreciated, and some think she invented toe shoes.



**François Boucher**  
French, 1702–1770

***The Love Letter***

1750. Oil on canvas mounted on wood. Timken Collection 1960.6.3

*The Love Letter* was commissioned by Madame de Pompadour herself. The king’s mistress ordered it and a companion painting for her chateau at Bellevue, where they probably hung over doorways, built into curving oval frames. Pieces of canvas were later added at the corners to make this painting rectangular.

The scene is a pastoral idyll. The young “shepherdesses” wear fine silks, and a contemporary audience would understand an erotic promise in the display of pink toes. Idealized visions of country life were common on the stage and in real-life masquerades. Denis Diderot, disdainful of the frivolity of Boucher’s scenes, complained, “Shall I never be rid of these damned pastorals?” Yet the encyclopedist, who was an influential critic, also appreciated the brilliance of Boucher’s painting, which captures the luminous colors of shells, butterflies, and polished stones—objects

the artist collected so he could copy their fragile iridescence.

**Attributed to Louis-Joseph Le Lorrain**  
French, 1715–1759

***Three Figures Dressed for a Masquerade***

1740s. Oil on canvas. Samuel H. Kress Collection 1961.9.92

The costumes and setting here suggest a masquerade, perhaps in Venice. Like the elegant and enigmatic trio depicted, however, the painting remains mysterious. It has been attributed to many different artists, most recently Le Lorrain, a little-known artist who spent nine years in Italy and was recognized primarily as a “painter of ruins.” Le Lorrain also designed interiors, furniture (including a neoclassical suite in a portrait by Greuze hanging in an adjoining gallery), and sets for public spectacles (like Louis XV’s coronation). The frosty colors and cold, hard light in this painting appear similar to those in another work by Le Lorrain, but few of his works exist for comparison. Eventually he accepted an invitation from Catherine the Great to head the Academy of Fine Arts in St. Petersburg, dying there only a few months after he arrived.



**Jean-Baptiste II Lemoyne**  
French, 1704–1778

***Jules-David Cromot, Baron du Bourg***

probably about 1757. Marble. Gift of Camille de Nuchèze, direct descendant, and her husband, John Hadley Cox 1985.39.1

Sweeping drapery and a taut twist of the head create movement and energy in this portrait bust. The slightly parted lips, drilled pupils, and carefully detailed features—the lines etched around eyes and mouth—animate the personality of the subject, who was a counselor to Louis XV and whose son fought in the American War of Independence. Both painted and sculpted portraits of the period sought to capture more than a sitter’s likeness, and Lemoyne has conveyed a sense of Cromot’s strong character and lively intelligence. His voluminous robes are a convention from ancient sculpture and partly cover his informal modern dress.

*The works of art discussed here are sometimes temporarily moved to other rooms or removed from display.*

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